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ABSTRACT

The study of Afro-American literature, a vast body of creative expression, can be a motivating force which leads black students to question, learn, and understand the history and culture of black people and, therefore, to understand themselves. This paper outlines and discusses several activities and intellectual exercises useful for promoting positive and progressive thinking in an Afro-American literature course. This course, following a chronological sequence (for example, the folk tradition, the slave narrative, and the Harlem Renaissance), would focus on representative authors and their works, the literary traditions, historical and cultural influences, and thematic and stylistic characteristics. The paper concludes that this course, in helping students to develop a philosophy of life which carries them beyond survival, must be viewed as a revolutionary force. (JM)

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TEACHING AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE AS A REVOLUTIONARY FORCE

The subject of this discussion, "Teaching Afro-American Literature as a Revolutionary Force," is risky since it will probably bring to the mind of some those days in the not too distant past when students, clad in dashikis and beads, entered the classroom demanding bombastically something relevant. The subject might also recall thoughts of uninformed professors who, eager to appease an anxious and angry audience, proceeded to initiate polemical rhetoric on racism, militancy, power to people, etc., and little or nothing on the history and development of Afro-American literature. Those were times when academic traditionalists, Black and white, were afraid to involve politics in literature, and the "revolutionaries" were too uninformed to recognize a detailed study of the literature as political.

Hopefully times have changed, and the seriously committed scholar and reader understand that Afro-American literature, by virtue of its existence and semi-acceptance as a valid and legitimate academic discipline in a hostile environment, is political, political in that it generally challenges conventional values and ideas. The politics, however, by no means negate the aesthetical and cultural values of Afro-American literature, and any efforts to reduce it to mere propaganda is unquestionably futile.

The idea for this discussion emerged out of a thought-provoking classroom experience a year ago. After having spent two weeks lecturing in detail on various aspects of the slave

narrative, I assigned Arna Bontemps' edition of Great Slave Narratives for discussion. My objectives were to provide significant information on the genre and require students to examine the selected narratives in light of the lecture, and then bring their own analyses and interpretations to bear on the subject. However, the discussion, like many others, resulted in my asking the questions, waiting patiently for answers, rephrasing the questions, and finally answering them as well. The students not only expressed a depressing lack of energy, but a disparaging lack of interest. Here we were, studying the life and experiences of our ancestors, heroes and heroines who had suffered the pangs of slavery, and felt themselves worthy of freedom, and the students were not at all enthusiastic. I wondered if the slave past meant anything to them or if they understood anything about it. Then something in their faces or perhaps the general attitude of nonchalance prompted me to ask a simple question, one which I subsequently discovered to be the most complex I had ever posed to them. The question was: "Can I get a volunteer to tell me five good things about himself or herself?" No one responded. Granted, many factors may have contributed to their lack of response, but I could not help but wonder if a lack of self-esteem, a misguided humility and years of mis-education contributed to the silence.

That experience forced me to reevaluate the primary objectives, which were to provide as much detailed information on the history, growth and development of Afro-American literature as could be

covered in a three quarter sequence. From Lucy Terry up to and including contemporary literature, the material was explored in an effort to provide information, to instill knowledge, to obliterate blatant ignorance of the area.

The intention here is not to suggest that these objectives were in error, but to point out that they were inconclusive, and obviously did not meet the socio-psychological needs of present-day students entering Afro-American Studies with little or no preparation for challenging traditional ideas, concepts and systems of thoughts. In addition, the purely academically rigid approach to teaching the material did not allow for the kind of exchange which motivated self-expression and creativity. Providing the information did not mean necessarily that all other needs would be met automatically. Consequently, it became clear that a major objective must be to help students to better understand themselves, their history and culture, to instill in them a positive sense of self, to motivate self-expression and to encourage creativity and independent thinking. With these additional objectives,Afro-American literature would become a revolutionary force.

As a vast body of creative expression, Afro-American literature is conducive to developing and presenting ideals, ideals which should challenge students to think about their experiences, and stimulate them to question everything. Adequately treated, the literature is a revolutionary force which should develop in the students a positive sense of history and culture, hence, a greater sense of self. Afro-American literature should

contribute to changing the state of being from general apathy to collective aggression. It should force students to question the present position of Blacks and set their sights on clearly defined progressive directions. In brief, Afro-American literature can be viewed as the North Star, pointing the way towards a wiser state of being.

Recognizing and teaching Afro-American literature as a revolutionary force do not mean that the classroom become a platform of polemical arguments and rhetorical propaganda. Such discussions often lead to pointless rantings and ravings based on oversimplified analyses of present-day situations and very little historical/cultural understanding. Neither does teaching Afro-American literature as a revolutionary force mean that the professor begin the course with a study of the contemporary period, inspite of the fact that modern day writers might be more appealing to uninformed students than would Jupiter Hammon or George Moses Horton, for example. Even a general familiarity with the literature suggests, contrary to the thinking of some, that Afro-American literature did not originate in the mid-sixties.

In approaching Afro-American literature in the classroom, the professor must set the stage for change by providing as much substantive background information as times provides. Ideally students would enter the class with some knowledge of West African folklore, an understanding of Black history, a reasonable knowledge of Western Civilization, and some familiarity

with literary devices. But since this is seldom if ever the case, the professor must be prepared to weave this information into the literature as appropriate. And, as Eugene Redmond says of the teacher of Black poetry in his book, Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, he must also provide "the deepest philosophical, religious, ethical, artistic and aesthetic tenents of Black life and expression."[1] Finally, students must understand at the onset that Afro-American literature, like the Afro-American experience, is not monolithic. There are differences in theme, language, form, literary devices, ideological references and experiences of the writers, and these differences reflect an ongoing creative process which provides insights and perspectives on Black people and their experiences. Providing such a solid background equips the students with the necessary tools for concrete analyses and interpretations, in addition to providing them with a working knowledge of the experiences out of which the material develops. Such preparation establishes an atmosphere of reorientation and redirection of thought processes, an atmosphere conducive to challenging traditional education and laying groundwork for independent thinking and creative expression.

Teaching Afro-American literature as a revolutionary force ostensibly challenges the professor to establish innovative and creative methods of presenting the material, in addition to developing meaningful assignments and activities. It is assumed that the committed professor recognizes first the value of a chronological exploration of the evolution of Afro-American

literature from its beginnings in the antebellum period up to and including the present. The chronological approach is essential, particularly in a survey course, in understanding the growth and development of the material and in recognizing it as an ongoing historical/cultural process. Examining the material chronologically of course requires a study of representative authors and their works from each major period, the literary traditions, historical and cultural influences, thematic and stylistic characteristics. This approach also provides a thorough knowledge of the period in addition to affording an opportunity to meet additional objectives such as providing a greater sense of history, culture and tradition, devising a system of ideals, beliefs and attitudes conducive to progressive thinking, recognizing authentic heroes and heroines, analyzing dominant themes, their relationship and significance to Black life, past and present.

There are several activities and intellectual exercises which the professor may discover useful in promoting positive and progressive thinking. In order to describe some of them, consider, for example,a study of the folk tradition, the slave narratives and the Renaissance, all of which must be explored in an Afro-American literature course.

Take the folk tradition, for example, the roots from which all other Black creative expression sprang. After a careful examination of Black folklore, the students might be required to identify certain folk expressions, legends, superstitions, etc., which are prevalent in the communities, especially

among older members, and compare them to materials which have been studied in class. Such an exercise gives the students a sense of identity with the past, greater insights into Afro-American culture, and an awareness of tradition. As a second activity, students could seek out community storytellers, record their stories, and compile them as a collection for classroom use. This experience would provide students an opportunity to analyze common elements in the stories, some which will suggest a system of values, a view of the environment and an attitude towards their condition, all which should be useful in understanding the people and the community. In a final exercise, students might compare and contrast present-day folk heroes with legendary and imaginative ones such as High John de Conqueror or John Henry. Having studied the historical role of these folk characters and their value to the Black psyche, students should be able to assess individuals in the community who are proclaimed as folk heroes and determine their contribution or the lack of it to the community. Do these folk heroes represent strength and courage? Do they possess qualities worthy of celebration, or are they the hustler types who have come to occupy major roles in Black film? Such questions should lead students to re-examine their own value system, their concepts of heroism and their perceptions of what it really means to be men and women of stature.

These kinds of projects and exercises can be extended further with the study of the slave narrative, the material which John Henrik Clarke refers to as "literature of celebration, celebration of survival in spite of oppression."[2] The slave

narrative, a major contribution of the slave to Afro-American culture, provides an invaluable resource for helping students achieve self-definition, self-expression and creativity. Having as its greatest theme, survival, individual slave narratives provide authentic portrayals of heroic and courageous Blacks who, in describing their escape from slavery to freedom, present valid accounts of their search for and attaining a positive concept of self. Clearly then, the narratives are valuable sources of intellectual, moral and spiritual stimulation.

One important project for students studying the narratives was suggested by Dr. Bernard Bell at the 1974 University of Iowa Institute of Afro-American Culture. It involved requiring interested students to collect and analyze information on the family in an effort to develop a sense of their own personal history, and therefore a sense of self.[3] Another significant activity would be to require students to write short autobiographies in which they must include information on people, places and situations which contributed to the development of attitudes, values, perceptions, etc. They should then compare their values and attitudes with those discovered in the narratives. This kind of exercise should enhance self-definition, creativity and self-expression, in addition to contributing to a reaffirmation of traditional values and attitudes. Finally, students would prosper from writing a character analysis of individual slaves in selected narratives. Such an analysis would force them to reflect on the slave's life from slavery to freedom, his progressive movement through the institution, his attitudes, values, etc., and assess these things from their (the students')

perspective. Along with furthering the study of the slave experience, the character analysis should help the students better understand themselves since they must ultimately make the analysis from their own point of view.

Another body of material which provides the teacher with opportunities to design assignments and activities which contribute to the development of the students is the New Negro Renaissance, more fashionably referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, and more recently described by Chestyn Everett as the "Harlem Reaffirmation."[4] Artistically, culturally, historically, sociologically, psychologically and politically significant, the period is among the most important in the positive progression of Black people in this country. Emerging as a result of several social and political developments--the spiritual and social emancipation demanded in 1903 by W.E.B. LuBois in his book, The Souls of Black Folks, the impact of World War I on the economy in general and Blacks in particular, the Great Migration, radicalism in racial thought, renewed self-respect and self-determination, the Renaissance is a challenge to both the students and the professor.

It is the professor's duty as a committed and persistent investigator of ideas to explore all of the many dimensions of the period, especially the literature. Students need to be made aware of the prolific group of writers that emerged during the period, their diverse backgrounds, experiences, attitudes and the literary, social and political concerns as demonstrated in their material. In addition, the students must be made to recognize that much of Renaissance literature is the cultural

expression of the people's experiences by artists who were, for the most part, psychologically and emotionally attuned to the mood, the tempo, the spirit of the times. With emphasis on identity, self-consciousness, race-consciousness, the African heritage, self-determination, solidarity, etc., issues which are of equal significance to us now, the Renaissance offers the teacher many opportunities to help students grow, develop and change.

For example, in order to enhance self-expression and creativity, students might consider writing skits dramatizing some of the themes prevalent in the literature or issues pertinent to the period. Or, those students who are musically inclined might set selected poetry to music. Some of Langston Hughes' poems would be especially applicable since some of them make use of blues and jazz rhythms. As another example of a creative activity, students could be assigned to write poems or short stories reflecting certain aspects of Harlem life during the Renaissance, or problems peculiar to the urban Black, particularly in Harlem. This exercise, in addition to stimulating creativity, should force students to examine images as well as learn more about the era.

Along with the creative assignments, there are several meaningful research activities which are equally beneficial to students. For example, a study of the influence of political developments and ideologies on the Renaissance writer would be valuable since it would give students the chance to research such figures as W.E.B. DuBois or Marcus Garvey, the extent to which the writers were affected by them and the reasons why.

Such a study increases the students' knowledge of history while providing further insight into the mind of the artist. Finally, since the question of identity was such a key issue during the Renaissance, the students would benefit from a detailed investigation of selected writers and their reaction to themselves as Blacks as it is reflected in their writing. For example, students could undertake as a major project a detailed study of Countee Cullen and examine particularly his works on Afro-American themes in order to understand better some of the identification dilemmas of the era and how they related to present situations.

Decades of Afro-American literature which follow the Renaissance continue to provide the professor with tools to aid students in acquiring self-definition, creativity and independent thinking. Arna Bontemps' historical novels, Black Thunder (1936) and Drums at Dusk (1939), both artistic recreations of scholarly research and study of actual historic events, can be used to help students recognize the ways in which the Black past can serve as a motivating force, especially if they are required to compare the fictional treatment of the slaves with their own researched findings. Or, as an extension of this study they might examine the life of other slaves and write their own stories as they perceive them.

Still another valuable tool for the professor in his/her attempt to help students develop is Margaret Walker's poem, "For My People" (1942). A beautiful recreation of the Black past, the Black present, and the Black future, the poem,

according to the author, represents "a kind of historical line--...a panoramic picture of Black life."[5] Students would benefit from exploring the poem for what it says about history, tradition and future directions.

Since Margaret Walker's "For My People" nundreds of poems and novels have been written, most which provide the professor with material conducive to the development of independent and creative thinking. The Afro-American novel, in many ways a creative expression of self-discovery and self-definition, is in fact a weapon for the committed professor in his/her efforts to combat unconsciousness, a lack of creativity and self-expression, and ignorance. The question of images, models, and directions towards independence and self-sufficiency can be explored, analyzed and evaluated in many Afro-American novels from William Wells Brown to the present. Many novels can be used to teach history, culture, tradition, and as such, they ultimately say something to the student about his own life and experiences, and about himself.

Afro-American poetry, ultimately an aesthetic response of the artist to the times, the conditions, the state of being of the people, provides material for the professor to use in suggesting directions, developing attitudes conducive to growth and change, and helping students understand what it means to be Black in America. Whether it is the neo-classical verse of Phillis Wheatley or the folksy blues lyrics of Langston Hughes or the earthy creations of Carolyn Rogers, there is something to be learned and understood about the history and culture of

Black people, and therefore something to be learned and understood about the self.

Admittedly, using the folk tradition, the slave narratives and the Renaissance as examples to illustrate certain methods and techniques is inconclusive since they do not represent the total realm of Afro-American literature. However, these areas do provide suggestions which can be applicable to other periods and genres. Also, some of the activities might be more appropriate for the sociologist or psychologist, but any professor of literature must realize that teaching literature requires so much more than just teaching literature. All of the activities may not be done in a one-year survey course as some could be handled more adequately in courses treating one genre or one period. However, regardless of the conditions under which Afro-American literature is studied, it must be treated as a tool to motivate students to question, to challenge, to investigate, to think. It must equip them with resources to combat negative self-images, and feelings of being "lost, disinherited and dispossessed."[6] And it must be used to develop a philosophy of life which helps them progress beyond survival. Afro-American literature must be viewed as a revolutionary force.

Footnotes

[1]Eugene Redmond, Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry (Garden City, New York, 1976), p. 2.

[2]John Henrik Clarke, "The Influence of Slave Narratives on Afro-American Literature," Lecture presented at the Afro-American Cultural Institute, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, June 18, 1974.

[3]Bernard Bell and Frederick Woodard, "Narratives and the Curriculum," Lecture presented at the Afro-American Cultural Institute, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, June 21, 1974.

[4]Chestyn Everett, "Tradition' in Afro-American Literature," Black World, XXXV, No. 2 (December 1975), 30.

[5]Charles H. Rowell, "An Interview with Margaret Walker," Black World, XXV, No. 2 (December 1975), 8.

[6]Margaret Walker, "For My People," Black Insights, ed. Nick Aaron Ford (Waltham, Mass., 1971), p. 95.

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